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# **Reflecting on the Interview as an Erotic Encounter**

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## **Reflecting on the Interview as an Erotic Encounter**

### **Abstract**

As researchers our sexualities are always relevant to the research process. However, when woman researchers engage in research with men about their (hetero)sexual experiences, our positionality becomes more explicitly central. This paper makes a methodological contribution to critical research into male sexualities by providing a reflexive analysis of cross-gender interviews conducted with 43 men about paying for sex. It employs an understanding of both the participant and the interviewer as *defended subjects* and it interrogates the complex interviewer-participant power relationship, offering a critical approach to understanding the knowledge that is produced by and within our research encounters.

Sex work; clients; reflexivity; cross-gender interviews; masculinities; qualitative methodology

### **Introduction**

Acknowledging the impact of sex and sexuality on fieldwork is fraught with complexities. However, ignoring our sexuality will not make it go away, but will simply impede our understandings of how it shapes our positionality in a number of contradictory ways. (Cupples, 2002: 388)

As researchers our sexualities, both self-identified and those assumed by our participants, are always relevant to the research process. However, when woman researchers engage in research with men about their (hetero)sexual experiences, our bodies become more explicitly central to the research process.

This reflexive paper is based on a broader study conducted with South African men who identified as clients of woman sex workers. Although sex work is commonplace within South African society, paying for sex largely remains a secretive activity due to the stigmatised and illegal status of the sex work industry in South Africa (Author, 2017). This paper makes a methodological contribution to feminist knowledge on researching men through offering a critical reflection of the interview relationship between myself, a woman researcher, and the men who chose to arrive to these interviews to speak about their experiences of paying for sex. I provide an account of the complex and shifting nature of the power dynamics within these

interviewer-participant relationships. Through employing the concept of the *defended subject* (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013), I show how my presence as a woman invited the telling of certain kinds of narratives, while my own anxieties resulted in the silencing of others. I discuss the methodological implications of these findings for understanding the knowledge that is produced in and through our research interviews.

### **Researching men: Feminist reflections**

Woman researchers who have written reflexively about their interviews with men who pay for sex reflect on the significance of their own gendered bodies to the research process (Grenz, 2005, 2010; Author, 2016; Taylor and O'Connell Davidson, 2010). They write about moments during their interviews where they were objectified or sexualised by their male participants and reflect critically on incidences where they felt they failed to challenge or resist their participants' problematic, patriarchal behaviour. In fact, woman researchers writing reflexively about interviewing men across a range of topics all have something to say about the 'doing' of gender within the interview context (Arendell, 1997; Boonzaier, 2014; Pini, 2004, 2005; Presser, 2005; Winchester, 1996).<sup>1</sup> They reflect upon and critique moments where their patterns of relating to their male participants reproduced traditional gender roles and perpetuated dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity. This body of work collectively highlights the contradictions involved in conducting feminist research with men, suggesting that, as woman researchers interviewing men, we might find ourselves performing the very discourses we try to resist through our work.

When interviewing men about an issue as stigmatised and (often) as secretive as paying for sex, Grenz (2005, 2010) notes how interviews can take on the form of the confessional

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<sup>1</sup> It is not only within cross-gender interviews that researchers find themselves colluding with their participants while doing research on sensitive or stigmatised subjects. Both Gadd (2004) and Gottzen (2013), for instance, write reflexively about the complexities of doing interviews with violent men.

where men come to confess to the researcher about their socially unsanctioned sexual practices (Foucault, 1981). The fact that interviews take on this confessional nature sets women researchers up, in line with traditional gender roles or emphasised femininity (Connell, 1987), as passive listeners of men's stories and facilitators of their talk. For example, in a previous research study with men who pay for sex in South Africa (Author, 2016), I reflected upon how the combination of feeling that I held my participants' deepest secrets in my hands and wanting to be the 'good' researcher led me to treat my participants with extra care, asking questions in non-threatening ways, and avoiding responding to them in ways that might have made them feel uncomfortable. I seldom challenged or resisted my participants' sexist or racist comments and gestures. I was horrified to realise how I had colluded with my participants and sometimes actually facilitated the production of these problematic discourses during interviews. Similarly, Arendell (1997: 363), in her research with divorced fathers, reflects on and questions her own collusion with participants, saying, 'in serving as an "audience" to these men... did I contribute to or even implicitly endorse the perpetuation of the system of male dominance?'. Conversely, Grenz (2005) argues that the aim of her research with men who pay for sex was not to change the individual men in her study, but rather to interrogate the very discourses that they produced:

On the one hand I clearly reproduced sexism just by being a woman, listening to my informants, and even encouraging them to talk. On the other, I challenged them, because my listening had an intention of its own. I made them my research 'objects'. (p. 2106)

Grenz captures well the complex, multidirectional and shifting nature of the power relationship that can operate within cross-gender interviews. On the one hand, interviews with men who pay for sex can become contexts where traditional gender roles are performed and reproduced. On the other hand, the interviewer is not only witness to participants' confessions, but also the authority figure who would make sense of, judge, validate, diagnose, or turn their confessions and narratives into academic knowledge. As researchers when we return from our interviews

to our desks to analyse and write about our participants' narratives, their confessions become our research objects.

These feminist reflections underline how approaching the research process with a critical reflexivity can bring to light the complex and fluid nature of the power relationship that might operate when women interview men about their sexualities. They also elucidate the impact that our own positionalities might have on the research process. Taylor and O'Connell Davidson (2010: 41), writing about their experiences of research on men who pay for sex, suggest that

It is one thing to recognise, in abstract, that researchers come to their research with particular histories and that the way their bodies are socially marked has implications for the process of research, but not so easy to write about it in relation to specific pieces of research.

In this paper, by providing specific examples from excerpts of interview transcripts and my research journal, I attempt this 'not so easy' exercise of interrogating the ways in which my gendered identity, as well as my personal anxieties and defences, directly impacted upon the data that was produced within research interviews with men who pay for sex.

## **Interviewing men who pay for sex: Methodology**

### *Theoretical Framework*

This research is situated within a feminist poststructuralist framework, understanding gender as socially constructed rather than biologically determined (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). I have found the concept of 'doing' gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987), the assumption that gender is something that is performed, a useful starting point for understanding this interview data. It is through performing certain everyday acts commonly associated with or expected of a particular gender that we are able to become intelligible as being of that gender within a particular society. Central to this paper, however, is the thinking of queer theorists such as Judith Butler (1999, 2008) and Sarah Ahmed (2006) who provide a less unidirectional and

static approach to gender, theorising gender as not only performed, as West and Zimmerman (1987) suggest, but also as *performative*. Butler posits that it is not purely because we are male or female, for example, or because we identify as a man or woman, that we perform certain corresponding gendered acts, but that through repeatedly performing these seemingly mundane acts we *become* gendered. In this sense, the gendered subject is created through its actions, rather than these actions merely proceeding from a stable gendered identity (Butler, 1988).

I extend the notion of gender as performed and performative to the research context. If we accept that we are all gendered subjects and that we are all constantly ‘doing’ gender as we go about our daily lives, then we must accept that our research interviews would in no way be immune to this ‘doing’ of gender. In our interviews, we as researchers, as well as our participants, must constantly be doing gender in relation to one another.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, interviews become sites where subjectivities are not only explored, but where they are produced (Sandberg, 2011). They become not only contexts where participants’ narrative accounts are collected, but also sites within which both the participant and the researcher perform, negotiate, resist, and construct their identities in relation to each other. Drawing on this kind of understanding of the research context, all the interactions, acts, and performances between the participant and researcher become potential units of analysis.

To theorise the interview context in this way is to acknowledge the impossibility of neutrality and objectivity within in the research process. It is to acknowledge that meaning is co-constructed by the researcher and the participant. Acknowledging one’s positionality within the research encounter has been widely engaged by feminist researchers because it is

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<sup>2</sup> For simplicity, in this paper I focus primarily on the performativity of gender and sexuality in the interview context. However, I acknowledge that it is problematic to present gender and/or sexuality as though they operate in isolation from other vectors of power such as race and class. The broader analysis of men’s narratives on paying for sex revealed how discourses of race and class continuously intersected and complicated meanings and performances of gender and sexuality. These interviews powerfully elucidated the ways in which these systems of power operate to bolster and maintain one another that it warranted a dedicated discussion elsewhere (Author, 2017).

epistemologically and ontologically connected with the feminist critique of knowledge and knowledge production (Pini, 2004). Such an approach not only contests the assumptions of researcher neutrality, objectivity, and detachedness prized by hegemonic research approaches, but also embraces the messiness of the research process and celebrates researchers' acknowledgment and analysis of it (Author, 2016).

Like other critical feminist scholars who have explored the dilemmas and dynamics of interviewing in the field of masculinities (e.g. Arendell, 1997; Boonzaier, 2014; Broom et al., 2009; Gadd, 2004; Gottzén, 2013; Grenz, 2005; Pini, 2005; Presser, 2005; Sandberg, 2011; Taylor and O'Connell Davidson, 2010), in this paper I place the interviewer-participant dynamics at the centre of my research focus. The type of reflexivity I employ is not secondary to the main analysis but is built into the very design of the research process. I hope that the discussion presented in this paper might invite others to look at their research encounters, and the knowledge produced there, through similar lenses.

In facilitating the analysis of the interview-participant relationship, I borrow from some psychoanalytic principles put forward by Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) psychosocial approach to the research process. They suggest that the interviewer and the participant's perceptions of each other are not purely derived from a 'real' research relationship but are influenced by our own histories and relationships that we bring with us into the research relationship. Hollway and Jefferson's concept of the *defended subject* is particularly helpful in making meaning of the discourses produced within the interviewer-participant relationship. They suggest that in every social encounter people experience anxiety resulting from perceived threats their identities. People draw on certain available discourses and discursive positions, rather than others, as defences against these feelings of anxiety. Therefore, in terms of the interview relationship, both the interviewer and the participant can be understood as defended subjects (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013)



### *Recruiting participants*

Forty-three South African men who identified as clients of woman sex workers were recruited via two online classifieds websites, Gumtree ([www.gumtree.co.za](http://www.gumtree.co.za)) and Locanto ([www.locanto.co.za](http://www.locanto.co.za)). I posted an advertisement on each of these platforms that stated that I was a doctoral student from the University of Cape Town looking to interview men who had paid for sex about their experiences and opinions on the topic. The advertisement provided an email address via which those who were interested in the project could contact me. Thus, all the men who participated in the project were self-selected and did so voluntarily. No form of compensation for their participation was offered, yet within the first few days of posting the advertisements, emails from men wanting to hear more about the project flooded in. The participants ranged between the ages of 22 and 67 years of age, with a mean age of just over 41 years.

### *Data collection*

Interviews were either conducted face-to-face or via online methods. One on one face-to-face interviews were conducted in coffee shops with 11 participants. Two interviews were conducted via Skype video calls. Thirty interviews were conducted using instant text messenger (IM) applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Gmail chat. Here I communicated with participants over text on a real time basis, providing a passport style photograph of myself as my profile picture.

The overall interview process was informed by a narrative research approach (Riessman, 2008) in that I was interested in how participants constructed and managed their identities through the stories they told. I aimed to ask open-ended questions such as ‘tell me about your first experience of paying for sex’ that invited participants to tell detailed stories about their

personal experiences of paying for sex, allowing them to lead the interview and determine its pace, tone, and content. However, in reality the interviews varied along a continuum from being relatively unstructured to being semi-structured, depending on the ease with which individual participants conversed. As a whole, face-to-face and Skype interviews tended to elicit longer, more detailed narratives. Text-based IM interviews tended to be more structured and participants and I were also inclined to converse in shorter sentences, often using the simple or shortened vernacular that is characteristic of text messaging. The use of a combination of face-to-face and online data collection methods allowed for rich and varied data to be collected. It also resulted in men from urban centres across South Africa being recruited into the study, allowing the study to benefit from a wide geographical reach.

### *Transcription*

Audio recordings were made of the face-to-face and Skype video interviews and these were transcribed verbatim. Because the interviewer-participant interactions and dynamics were of interest in this project, when transcribing the face-to-face interview data, I paid careful attention to subtle interpersonal communications such as pauses, sighs, laughter, and repetitions (Wetherell, 1998). Online interviews were directly converted to word processor documents and analysed in their original form.

### *Research journal*

In keeping with the aim of building reflexivity into the design of the research project, I kept a research journal throughout the research process. The process of journaling was instrumental in allowing me to interrogate how my intersecting identities influenced the research process. I was able to reflect on my positionality within the research process and explore and unpack the

personal biases and the anxieties, frustrations, shame, anger, and amusement that I experienced at different moments in the research process.

### *Data analysis*

I did not employ a set step-by-step framework for data analysis. Instead, my approach to data analysis was eclectic and intuitive. I approached the data from a feminist poststructuralist epistemological framework, specifically identifying the ways in which participants and I performed and negotiated our various intersecting identities within the moment of the interview. I identified the discursive patterns in participants' talk by employing an approach to discourse analysis that could be defined as a 'sensitivity to language rather than as a "method"' (Parker, 2004: 310). Relying on principles from both Foucauldian and discursive psychology<sup>3</sup> I identified the broader social discourses participants drew on, and also analysed how they deployed these discourses in the immediate interview context to construct and negotiate various identities and subject positions for themselves. I was further informed by a narrative approach, in the sense that I was careful to keep the narratives that participants told intact where possible, viewing these stories as strategic and functional and as units of analysis (Riessman, 2008). I used this eclectic analytic approach to organise my data thematically: identifying common themes and subthemes (pertaining to the content of the data and the nature of the interviewer-participant relationship) retuning to, re-organising, and refining these themes repeatedly.

### **Discussion: The interview as a 'two-way street'**

As researchers our identities can begin to impact on research before our participants even arrive to interviews. In fact, our identities can influence whether they arrive at all. People's choice to participate in our research is neither incidental nor irrelevant to our research questions. People

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<sup>3</sup> Discursive psychology is inspired by conversation analysis and ethnomethodology, for further reading see Wetherell (1998)

arrive for interviews with particular hopes, expectations, or presumptions about the interview and what they might gain from it, as well as what they might contribute to it. Therefore, exploring our participants' motivations for arriving, and the conditions under which they have arrived for interviews, will invariably provide us with valuable insight into their subjectivities in relation to our research topics. The excerpt below explores Dan's reasons for arriving and demonstrates how his perception of my gender and sexuality impacted on his decision to participate in the study.

Interviewer: Yea that's always one of my questions, like what made you decide that you would be willing to contribute?

Dan: ... Oh, ok. I, I, I [long silence] I mean when we started chatting over, you know, Locanto messages, the more I thought about it, the more it became a bit of turn on for me.

Interviewer: Well obviously for me this about my research

Dan: No, no I understand, I'm not hitting on you or anything. You asked why. And yea, so the more chatting to a total stranger um you know had some sort of appeal... I was really nervous as the beginning, but I told you as we were chatting on Locanto and then email I kind of got more into it and it started becoming more erotic for me, um to talk about it. Specially, I mean, if you were a guy I don't know if I would have actually spoken to you to be quite honest.

Interviewer: And why is that? Because I mean a lot of people say that so.

Dan: I donno, I think it's just guys feel more comfortable around a woman.

Interviewer: Yea, if I was a guy, a male researcher?

Dan: Yea, but like I wouldn't let a guy massage me you know.

Interviewer: Sure. But this is supposed to be different!

Dan: No it is to a point, but it's kind of the same mind set, that was my point when I said I would never let a guy massage me. I don't feel comfortable opening up my secure side to a male, um. And I think maybe because opening up and talking about it, talking about my

experiences is arousing for me, I definitely wouldn't wanna do it with a guy.

Interviewer: Sure

Dan: So yea I didn't expect like this, because it's been quite nice chatting to you, it's been yea, opening up, I've never told people things like that. It's been, um, ah, [silence] a turn-on, I'll probably have to go rub-off after this, um, but it's it been very interesting... I think for me it was a two-way street, we both got something. (*Dan, 37: Skype*)

Dan acknowledges that, rather than just the telling of his sexual stories, my presence, as a woman bearing witness to his sexual stories, was a necessary condition for the interview to be an erotic experience for him. Many participants explicitly stated that they would not have arrived for the interview had I been a man. This might partly be understood as participants' expression of homophobia or of *homohysteria*, the fear of being perceived as homosexual that those living within a homophobic society experience (Anderson, 2013). It might also be related to dominant discourses that position women as empathetic listeners (Arendell, 1997). However, when I ask Dan why he would not have been willing to be interviewed by a male researcher, Dan likens my listening to his sexual stories to other erotic acts (like massages) that a woman might offer him. In this moment, rather than just being the interviewer, I become a woman with whom he could potentially have a sexual encounter.<sup>4</sup> In response to Dan's comparison I exclaim (and I remember the exasperation I felt) 'but this is supposed to be different!'. This sentence is pertinent because it reflects how my own gendered position and my own expectations impacted upon how I related to my participants in the moment of the interview. Here the words 'supposed to' are central: I am suggesting that the men in the interviews are 'supposed' to treat me as a professional rather than a potential sexual object.

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<sup>4</sup> When I suggest that I became a woman with whom Dan could have a sexual encounter, I use the notion of becoming discursively rather than materially. This interview was conducted online, and Dan lived in a different province to me, thus it is highly unlikely that Dan had expectations of having sex with me.

However, my professional identity did not override my positioning as a woman (Arendell, 1997). Almost every participant either asked me whether I had ever sold sex, whether I would consider selling sex, or suggested that I should sell sex. For example, Benjamin (22, *Instant messenger*) asked, ‘have you thought about actually advertising yourself? You can command a high fee’. Rather than remaining just the interviewer, I became someone from whom men like themselves could buy sex, and I became a woman whose body could be appraised and monetised by them.

Men’s sexualisation (of me and the interview more broadly) functioned not only at a discursive, but also at an affective, level: it made me *feel* like I was not a real researcher. I reflected on this in my research journal:

My interview with Dan has left me feeling resentful and panicky... what do I do with these parts of the interviews, like where Dan says he’ll probably go and jerk off after the interview? Surely this doesn’t count as data? Could I just exclude these sections of talk from my analysis? Do I have to transcribe them? If people were to read these would they take the rest of my research project seriously? Would they think that, rather than real research interviews, these were just something men used to ‘get off’ over. Is this even a real research project? Am I really interviewing these men or am I just playing into their fantasies?

As I identified with men’s sexualisation I began to question whether I was a proper researcher and whether my project was ‘real’ research. I argue that these interview dynamics are significant because they reflect broader patterns of gendered power relations that continue to operate in society. My feeling of being discredited and ashamed in response to participants’ sexualisation in the interviews tells us something about how men’s sexualisation of women in professional or workplace settings still operate in ways that diminish their sense of power and credibility in these settings.

As interviewers it is important to look not only at what our participants project onto us, and how we may identify or disidentify with these projections, but also at how our own defences shape our interview relationships and the data that emerges from them (Gadd, 2004). A more critical reflection of the interview transcripts revealed that I too entered the interview

as a *defended subject* who felt, and guarded against, threats to my identity (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). I approached the interviews with the expectation that men might sexualise me. I brought with me a personal discomfort about being sexualised in this way and an anxiety that if they did so that it might negate the integrity of my research. As my journal entry reflects, I was reluctant to acknowledge men's sexualisation of me in writing up my findings, as I was anxious of how I would open myself up to the scrutiny of other academics who might prejudice me in the same way these men did.

I theorise the root of these anxieties as manifold and intersecting. My anticipation of men's sexualisation was partly linked to my positionality as a woman; as woman researchers we bring with us a history of being (both overtly and covertly) sexualised in various spheres of our lives. My insecurities and anxieties about how this sexualisation would negate my position as a researcher and the credibility of my work can be attributed to traditional research discourses that privilege and uphold the illusion of the researcher as neutral, objective, and detached. Other researchers have written about their experiences of being stigmatised and having their work discredited within academic peer groups for researching topics of a sexual nature (Attwood, 2010; Fahs et al., 2017; Hammond and Kingston, 2014). For instance, Cupples (2002) discusses how researchers might avoid acknowledging the erotic elements present in their research for fear that these might call into question the credibility of their work. Similarly, Taylor and O'Connell Davidson suggest that:

Prostitution [sic] occupies a troubled and troubling space between two very different symbolic domains – the public world of market relations, and the private domain of sexual and domestic life... Researchers who enter this space are often conscious that they too may be perceived negatively, that their academic peers may suspect them of having failed to maintain clear boundaries between their 'public' professional selves and their 'private' sexual selves. (2010: 50)

Upon deeper reflection I, much later, realised that my personal discomfort with being sexualised in this way by these particular men who pay for sex also had something to do with

my own desire to perform the ‘right’ kind of femininity and to be the ‘good’ or ‘respectable’ kind of woman within the interview. Being sexualised by my participants was threatening to me because it had the potential to make me feel like a ‘whore’. I thus explicitly rejected and thereby actively distanced myself from this ‘whore’ identity in moments of the interviews. In doing so I actively reproduced the harmful madonna/whore dichotomy of feminine sexuality that both continues to police and limit women’s sexualities and stigmatises sex workers, a discourse I always aim to challenge through all my research into the sex industry (Hollway, 2001).

Thus, dominant discourses on what it means to be a respectable researcher, as well as what it means to be a respectable woman, produced a defended subject who had a strong desire to manage and control participants’ eroticisation of interviews, particularly any sexual emotion directed toward myself. The effects of my defensiveness are evident in the excerpt from Dan’s narrative above. Instead of letting him honestly reflect upon his experience of doing the interview (which is, as he rightfully points out, what I asked him to do) I tell him how he is ‘supposed to’ relate to me in the interview. However, as researchers we base our claims to knowledge on the assumption that participants would reveal something of what they are ‘really’ like to us. In this sense, it could be argued that these men were then ‘supposed to’ show me that they are people who pursue opportunistic sex, without commitment and with unknown women, which is exactly what participants like Dan did. But, because of my need to control and contain the interview, them showing me their real selves, when I was implicated in it, was unbearable for me.

In Jez’s narrative below, where the online interview again becomes an erotic space, I respond far more defensively, setting very clear boundaries and (re)establishing my position as researcher:

Jez:                   We, going into some serious depth now. It's a two-way street. First, I want to know what you enjoy sexually. Not details just basics. Then I will tell you what sparked me to see selective working girls.



Interviewer: I'm sorry but I don't want to make this conversation about me and my sexuality. I understand that in a way that's a bit unfair, but I have to set some guidelines for my research...

Jez: Ok let me ask basic questions that are common. You can answer yes or no. What I have learnt in my MBA is that practical experience is what contributes significantly to one's understanding of the theory. Ok here goes. Do you enjoy foreplay as a build up? Oral sex giving and receiving?

Interviewer: I'm really sorry but with all due respect, I am going to have to end this interview now...

Jez: If you are not open-minded enough to be able to reciprocate with mutual opinion you are wasting your time with this project and it will, believe me, be the difference between a C grade and A grade with distinction. You will never understand a one-sided opinion until you get questioned

*(Jez, 45: Instant messenger)*

Firstly, the above excerpt illustrates the shifting nature of power relations within the interview. It could be argued, following Grenz (2005: 2097), that when a woman interviews a man about his sexuality, the heteronormative position of the male 'looker' and the female 'looked-at' is subverted, placing women in a position of power that threatens traditional gendered power relations. With this in mind, it could be suggested that, by focusing the questions back on me, particularly on my sexuality, men like Jez attempt to return me to my rightful place as the 'looked at' rather than the 'looker'. Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) also interpret men's sexualisation of women in cross-gender interviews as men's attempts to exercise and reassert power over them. Indeed, there were many other ways in which men attempted to challenge my position of power within these interviews, for example men tried to challenge the power I potentially wielded as a function of my level of education by undermining my intelligence or by trying to appear equally or more educated or knowledgeable than I (note how above Jez places emphasis on his own MBA). However, the interview with Jez illustrates how, even

though men exercised their power in the interviews, I, as the interviewer, did have the ‘final say’, as in this instance it is I who ends the interview and I who later turned this encounter into a journal article based on my interpretations.

In this interview with Jez I seem to have been, as Gadd (2004, p. 395) reflects in his paper exploring the dynamics between him and a male interviewee, ‘far more geared towards establishing my intellectual authority, rather than the particular methodological imperatives I adopted’. Feminist researchers such as Oakley (1981) have called for egalitarian interviewing methods that include mutual disclosure. It is this mutual disclosure that Jez is demanding from me. I, the defended subject, refuse to disclose anything about my own sexuality, despite expecting my participants to do so themselves. I end the interview early, abandoning my research principles and losing the opportunity to hear Jez’s whole story.

Dan and Jez’s narratives provide clear examples of how the interview relationship itself became transactional and I become enveloped into the discourse of the ‘two-way street’. Jez attempts to use the resources that I need (his narratives and knowledge on the topic) in order to coerce me into complying with his sexual demands, becoming quite threatening when I do not ‘reciprocate’. Here, Jez tries to turn my ‘no’ into a ‘yes’ by insisting that my choosing to study men’s sexual narratives means that I must be consenting to talking about my own sexuality.

It could be argued that men’s ‘two-way street’ fantasies, and the ways in which the lines between consent and coercion become blurred in the research relationship, resemble those of the date-rape scenario<sup>5</sup> and reflect broader patterns of domination found in heterosexual relations. This question of coercion and consent takes me back to another excerpt from my research journal, one where I reflect upon my responses to the ways in which men often made me the object of their sexual stories by simply substituting me, as an ‘example’, into their narratives about their erotic encounters with women:

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<sup>5</sup> For a helpful psychosocial analysis of popular discourses around consent versus coercion through the deconstruction of media coverage of a date-rape case, see Hollway and Jefferson (1998).

As I listened to Cyril describe me giving him a blowjob I felt resentful. If any other man I did not know in any other setting had begun describing himself undressing me and us having oral sex I certainly would have stopped him in his tracks. But I didn't. As the researcher I felt I had to listen, because after all, I 'asked for it', didn't I?

The double-edged nature of doing this kind of research is further revealed in this excerpt from my research journal. I reflect on feeling like I could not stop or call my participants out for sexualising me because 'I asked for it' – I had asked them to tell me stories of a sexual nature. This discourse of 'asking for it' reminds me of when I counselled and facilitated therapeutic support groups for women who had been raped. I was often struck by the intense feelings of self-blame that many of these women carried. Perhaps some of my discomfort here is related to finding myself in a position where (save for my interpretations) I became the 'done to', rather than wholly being in the powerful position of the therapist or interviewer, where I could hold and control these kinds of emotions and challenge these damaging discourses. Some of my anxiety came from realising that I could not fully transcend the gender discrimination of the research encounter and I could not write it out of my research.

### **Concluding comments**

'At least two entities have to arrive to create an encounter' (Ahmed, 2006: 39)

To claim neutrality as an interviewer, and thus to ignore our own presence in the research encounter and the conditions under which we came to arrive there, is to tell only half the story of our research. This paper makes a methodological contribution to critical research into male sexualities by providing a reflexive analysis of interviews with men about paying for sex. Specifically, the paper has employed an understanding of both the participant and the interviewer as *defended subjects* and it has interrogated the complex interviewer-participant power relations, offering a critical approach to understanding the knowledge that is produced by and within our research encounters.

Firstly, this paper has highlighted the value of exploring how, as researchers, our own defences limit and shape our interview relationships and the data that emerges from them (Gadd, 2004). I have paid attention to the ways in which my positionality as a woman researcher impacted on how participants related to me in interviews, the narratives they chose to share, and even their reasons for arriving to the interviews in the first place. However, I have also positioned myself within the data as a *defended subject*. I have critically reflected upon the ways in which my own anxieties around being sexualised by my participants directly influenced which kinds of narratives I allowed to emerge from the interviews and which narratives I silenced.

This paper also reflects on the complex power relations that might present themselves in cross-gender interviews such as these. It shows how attending to the question of power within the interview relationship might not always equate to the unidirectional redistribution of power – a straight line – from the researcher to the researched. This paper suggests that the flow of power within the research relationship can be multidirectional: a complex, fluid, ever-shifting, dynamic that sometimes more closely resembles the back-and-forth of a ping-pong game than it does a straight line.

This paper also brings to the fore some of possible dilemmas and contradictions that feminist researchers interviewing men might be confronted with. For example, in not fully confronting men about their sexualisation of the interview, in order to keep the relationship intact, I became complicit in their sexism. On the other hand, resisting men's sexualisation and defending my position as a researcher (which I felt was threatened by men's sexualisation) meant simultaneously abandoning some of my research principles. My insistence on being positioned as the 'respectable researcher' rather than the 'whore' actively reproduced and reinforced the damaging binary discourses that continue to limit, police, and stigmatise women.

Regardless of how we approach the interview-participant relationship (be it challenging and limiting men's narratives or facilitating and encouraging them), feminist researchers are likely to find ourselves contradicting or working in opposition to our methodological or ideological principles at some point in the research process. These difficulties and contradictions are never completely avoidable. Therefore, as researchers we should aim to build an analysis of these dynamics into our research designs, rather than eliminate or conceal them. This paper provides the reader with some concrete examples of how this kind of reflexivity can be incorporated into the research design: approaching the research encounter as a context where gendered identities are both performed and produced; employing eclectic methods of data analysis that are sensitive to the discursive and account for micro-communications between interview and participant; keeping a research journal; and critically reflecting on every stage of the research process from before our participants arrive for interviews until after we have transformed their narratives into publications. These can help us to develop an approach to our research that both foregrounds questions of power within the interview relationship and interrogates our own role, as defended subjects, in shaping the knowledge that is produced within the research encounter.

Although it might be uncomfortable to reflect upon the erotic elements of our research encounters, particularly when we find that we are the objects of the eroticism, it is important that we do. Although it might not be easy, it is important to acknowledge that there will be moments in our interviews where our own defences directly determine and limit the narratives that are produced within our research encounters. In fact, perhaps we should reflect on these moments specifically because it is difficult and uncomfortable to do so, because, as Ahmed (2013: xvii) suggests, 'difficulties are, as ever, pedagogic'.

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